Renewing American Foreign Policy: Values and Strategy

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Debates over the past several years about U.S. national interests and foreign policy in the post–Cold War world carry all-too-familiar echoes of the debates that raged during the Cold War itself. What we should have learned from the Cold War is that a strong and pragmatic U.S. foreign policy based squarely on American values—freedom, democracy, free markets, the rule of law, and free trade foremost among them—can be both successful and sustainable. It is a lesson that applies as much today as at any time in the past.

Remembering the Old Debates

Roughtly fifteen years ago, when I first came to office in Washington as a member of Congress, debates about the direction of U.S. foreign policy and our role in the Cold War were at their height. The Reagan Administration was in the middle of the largest defense build-up in our history. We were pressing ahead with nuclear deployments and strategic defense. We had begun a more energetic effort to challenge the Soviet Union globally.

Critics at the time blasted these Cold War policies. They argued that the U.S. should seek points of common ground with the Soviet Union, cut defense spending, distance itself from unsavory right-wing regimes, and reverse policies in Central America and elsewhere. Revisionist historians argued that the United States was largely to blame for the Cold War. Some of the most heated, personalized debates I have ever experienced on Capitol Hill—particularly those concerning democracy and communism in Central America—took place during this period. It is easy to forget those arguments today, but they were very real at the time.

As these debates were still raging, the ground shifted underneath us. The Warsaw Pact was disbanded and the Soviet Union collapsed. Dynamic global capitalism and determined U.S. pressure, backed up by unmatchable defense spending, had pushed the Soviet Union over the edge and cleared the way for Russian democrats to come to the fore.

Not surprisingly, this put an abrupt end to the policy debates of the Cold War. Although perhaps not every individual U.S. policy had been vindicated, American global leadership had been. Today it is taken for granted that steady U.S. policy promoting and protecting freedom, democratic systems, free markets, and free trade was both right and essential. Indeed, it is common to hear the comment that those policies were "easy," compared with the difficulties of shaping policy in the "complex" world of today. To be honest, I don't recall those debates and decisions being so "easy" at the time.

Many commentators who look back at this period simplify U.S. Cold War policy as merely the reaction to an external threat—a circling of the wagons. While this is partly true, it misses a larger truth. America's Cold War policy was based first and foremost on its faith in the core values of liberal democracy. Our foreign policy was an outward projection of our own belief in the American idea. Soviet communism was a threat not simply because of geopolitics and nuclear weapons, although these were certainly important. Soviet communism directly threatened our values. While Kennan and others were able to identify the policy imperative of containing communism, only through a reaffirmation and projection of our values could we mobilize and sustain American public support for this policy. The United States did not merely stand up against communist totalitarianism; it stood for freedom, markets, and democracy. We believed in American values and acted accordingly.

Looking at the New Debate: How Could We Forget So Soon?

Almost as surprising as the collapse of the Soviet Union has been the speed and extent to which contemporary experts seem to have lost their bearings about American foreign policy. One might have expected that, based on the recent American success in the Cold War, consensus would have strengthened behind the same principles and vision that guided us then. Instead, there seems to be a great uncertainty surrounding our foreign policy.

In journal articles and Op-Ed pieces, several authors have taken up the theme that America had lost its sense of purpose. They propose reasons to explain this phenomenon—from lack of a worthy enemy to the development of a more multicultural society at home—and they offer solutions ranging from a renewed focus on "global issues" to pulling back behind our borders until a new threat emerges.

In looking at these two debates about U.S. Cold War policies fifteen years ago and U.S. foreign policy today, I see one important similarity: in both cases, there has been a puzzling tendency among many commentators to underestimate the importance of American values, both as a basis for unifying our country at home and for orienting our relations with the world abroad.

Unlike other nations, America was founded explicitly as a commitment to the fundamental idea that universal human values exist and must be reflected in the way government and the people relate to one another. The values embedded in this American idea include democracy, pluralism, limited government, free markets, constitutionality, the rule of law, free trade, and individual freedoms and rights. It is an idea that has not changed over fifteen years or even 200 years. It is as valid now as at any time in the past, and is still a rallying point—even in foreign policy—for the U.S. public. It is, after all, what makes us American.

Some have argued that changes in our own society are shaking the foundations of this American idea, and that our old assumptions no longer apply. I heartily disagree. Large-scale immigration into the U.S., maintenance of distinct ethnic communities, and the advocacy of ethnic groups within the United States for homeland-oriented foreign policies, to name a few examples, are not new phenomena. They do nothing that should cause us to question our basic principles.

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Indeed, what has been striking over time is how immigrants from all over the world continue to be drawn to the United States because of their inherent belief in political freedom and economic opportunity and how, despite the diversity represented within our society, the popular consensus around the American idea remains enormously strong. When our people argue, it is always about the application of our American values, not the values themselves.

The values inherent in the American idea are indeed universal; they are shared by people across countries and across continents. What this means for foreign policy is that promoting freedom, democracy, the rule of law, free markets, and free trade is not some singular crusade the United States wages against the rest of the world. Rather, it is a critical means by which the world's most successful democracy and only superpower supports what most people and many governments already want. As much as at any time in the Cold War, we must reaffirm the central role of American values in our foreign policy today.

Interests

At the same time that America's values are universal, its interests are far-reaching. The United States is probably the only country that perceives at least some level of national interest in the actions of nearly every country in the world. Perhaps even more important, as the world's only political, economic, and military superpower, the United States is the country most affected by foreign events and other countries' foreign policies. Indeed, the United States is quite often the deliberate target of other countries' policies—be it market protection, weapons proliferation, destabilizing regional activities, or targeting exports to the U.S. market.

If we engage actively in foreign policy, we can have the power and vision to shape the world around us and promote our long-term interests. But if we fail to engage, we cannot prevent measures from being taken that are contrary to our interests.

But there must be caution. Because of our values and our far-reaching interests, there is often a temptation to inject the United States into every foreign policy issue that arises. Yet we have limited resources, and not all of our perceived interests are of equal importance. It is clearly neither possible nor desirable for the United States simply to dive into every individual foreign problem and devote whatever efforts are necessary to bring about an American solution.

We need a focused strategy that allows us to sort through the day-to-day problems that arise, and ensures that we apply our resources where they will have the greatest impact over the long-term. Such a strategy is just as important to crafting our foreign policy as the fundamental American values on which it must rest.

Strategy: Building on Our Points of Strength

As in domestic politics, the first principle of foreign policy is to solidify your base. In foreign affairs, this means strengthening the countries and international institutions that embody our values.

This was exactly the strategy followed by our foreign policy leaders after World War II. Within a very short time, we created the IMF, the World Bank, the United Nations, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, NATO, and the Marshall Plan, and encouraged the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community, which has since evolved into the European Union. Solidifying our base then—when the world was just emerging from war—meant creating the institutions that would protect and expand security, democracy, and prosperity.

Today, these and other institutions, as well as our key Allies and partners, still form our strategic base. Our first priority should be to keep that base strong and vital, reinforcing the institutions and helping out colleagues who fall into difficulty. In turn, the countries that form this base will be our natural allies in projecting our shared values in their own regions and globally. In other words, our strategy should be to build incrementally on the successes we have already had to date.

Applying Our Strategy

This brings us to the key foreign policy issues before the Senate this year: NATO enlargement, Bosnia, Iraq, the Asian financial crisis and increasing the IMF's reserves, and—one can still hope—fast track negotiating authority for developing free trade in the western hemisphere. In each case, we need to have a clear sense of our values and interests, and how the issue fits into a focused, long-term strategy.

Europe: NATO and Bosnia

In Europe, our strategic base is extremely well defined: NATO, the EU, the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), and so forth. With the Cold War over, we need to ensure that these core institutions remain strong, and then embark—as we have—on a gradual path of expansion.

In the case of the OSCE, the expansion is conceptual: a move for greater application of the norms and principles adopted within the organization over the years. In the case of NATO and the EU, expansion must be geographic. We should bring into the fold those countries that have recently adopted and fully applied our values, thereby expanding our base and projecting security, and political and economic development further to the east and south. Done right, this will stabilize the gains of democracy, liberalism, and economic reform in those states that have already reformed (strengthening our base further) and increase the prospects for additional progress in neighboring areas. NATO enlargement—together with enlargement of the EU—supports our values, is in the strategic interest of the United States, and is indeed the core of a broad strategy for shaping the political, economic, and security environment in Europe for decades to come.

This type of building-block strategy is a far better investment with a greater chance of long-term success than simply diving into crises without linking our actions to a broader strategy. Such has been the problem with our Bosnia policy.

In Bosnia, our values are clearly engaged: we want to promote democracy, human rights, and peace. But our national interests are not engaged in Bosnia so much as they are in the effects of the Bosnia crisis on stability in the region, on perceptions of American leadership, on our Allies, and on NATO. Building a credible policy on Bosnia is going to have to take account of not only our values, but also our limited national interests in the issue per se, and a realistic assessment of how the Bosnia problem fits into the larger issues of Europe where our strategic interests are truly engaged.

Thus far, our resource commitment in Bosnia has been enormous and open-ended. One can easily argue that it is out of proportion to its importance to the United States. NATO enlargement is projected to cost the Alliance only $1.5 billion in common funding over ten years. The Bosnia mission has already cost the United States alone nearly $8 billion, and we are still far from a permanent solution.

While NATO enlargement represents a strategic step with long-term implications, the Bosnia mission is an isolated policy—a finger in the dike that prevents expansion of the conflict, halts the fraying of consensus within NATO, and minimally satisfies our humanitarian concerns.

I certainly do not advocate a funding cut-off in Bosnia. That would punish our troops for what is in fact a failure of policy-making in Washington. But I am also not satisfied with the status quo. The Administration has not done its job of clearly laying out our values, our interests, and our overall strategy. Nor has it defined a clear and achievable military mission for U.S. forces. Instead, our troops are hostage to political progress, increasingly engaging in civilian and police work rather than accomplishing a military mission.

Thus it is no surprise that there is strong support in the Senate for NATO enlargement where our values, interests, and strategy are clear, and that there is serious disagreement between the Administration and the Congress over Bosnia, where these things are not clear at all.

Iraq

On a third issue, Iraq, there is full agreement between the Administration and the Congress on the values and interests at stake. Yet there remains one fundamental difference: the Congress is insisting on a clear, long-term, achievable strategy. The experience over the past few years is one of the U.S. drifting from crisis to crisis, ceding the initiative to the UN or Saddam Hussein, as need be, in order to address the issue of the moment without regard to the long term.

As these repetitive crises serve only to strenghten Saddam Hussein over time, the Congress is increasingly coming to the conclusion that our strategy must deliberately focus on weakening Saddam Hussein and removing him from power if necessary. It is also essential that we press our European Allies to do more to support a long-term solution in Iraq.

Asia and the IMF

In Asia, as in Europe, our base is well defined: the U.S.-Japan strategic relationship, APEC, ASEAN, involvement of global financial institutions, and so forth.

As elsewhere, the key is to use energetically our major institutions and relationships as part of a positive strategy of strengthening our base and expanding it.

Looked at this way, helping our Asian partners through the current financial crisis and making sure the IMF has the resources necessary to do its job are essential parts of our Asian strategy. Many countries in Asia have not been sufficiently democratic, and their economies have not been sufficiently open. These problems were key contributing factors to the financial crisis. Movement in these areas has long been a goal within APEC and ASEAN, but progress has been too slow.

Now, a strong U.S. response to the Asian financial crisis provides an opportunity to move forward in pushing for greater transparency, market mechanisms, and political liberalism as part of the antidote to the current financial turmoil. But this does not mean that the IMF should use a "cookie-cutter" approach to all financial troubles. Asia needs the IMF's help in implementing sound reforms. But these reforms must necessarily be somewhat different for Asia's ailing tigers than they were for debt-strapped Latin America and Africa.

In responding to the Asian financial crisis, it is essential that we recognize that, as long as we have economically and politically stable partners in Asia, we will be able to work together gradually to expand the zone of security, democracy and prosperity to—for example—Vietnam, Cambodia, Burma and, of course, China. This must be our long-term strategy.

Western Hemisphere

Finally, this need for a long-term strategy, based on our values and our interests, applies in our own hemisphere as well. More people in the Americas live under democracy than ever before. Our hemisphere is more prosperous than ever before. This, plus the North American Free Trade Agreement, already forms our strategic base. The opportunities for using this base to build lasting institutions for a strong, democratic, free-trade and free-market western hemisphere are greater than at any time in the past.

The most important step we must take is to reinvigorate our vision for a hemisphere that is free, democratic, market-oriented, and open for trade. Central to this vision is creating a hemispheric free-trade area over the long-term. There is already movement toward greater free-trade in South America—through MERCOSUR, among other groupings—but these developments are taking place without United States participation, let alone leadership.

The risks for the United States are real: if the MERCOSUR enterprise succeeds, it will almost certainly raise external barriers in order to promote its internal market, thereby disadvantaging the United States and creating a system of competing economic blocks within the hemisphere. Yet if the enterprise fails to make real progress, it could undermine the confidence in free markets and democracy in many countries, as has happened so many times before in this hemisphere. It could leave the United States with diminished trade and investment possibilities, economically driven illegal immigration, a renewed economic appeal of drug production in South America, and the possible need to deal with problems of instability.

Unfortunately, it appears that the moment for moving ahead with fast track negotiating authority, which would enormously strengthen our hand in pursuing a long-term strategy in Latin America, has been lost for the time being. One can only hope that the opportunity to move ahead comes again soon—before the 2000 presidential elections—and that when it does, the Administration and Congress successfully build the case for how our values, interests and long-term strategy fit together to support fast track authority.

The United States has always been a nation committed to values. It is not the way of the United States to pursue a foreign policy based on narrow interests regardless of these values, or to disengage from foreign affairs, or to promote our values without a realistic strategy that takes account of our interests and limitations. The foundation of an American foreign policy strategy must be to stand firmly on our belief in the American idea, and then to nurture carefully the building blocks that will allow for the natural spreading of this idea over time.